

THE GREAT WAR AND ROMANIA'S FATE IN EUROPE

IOAN-AUREL POP

Member of the Romanian Academy

The Great War – although it had started in the South-East of Europe – was thoroughly prepared in Western and Central Europe, as well as overseas, or in the Tsarist Empire. Naturally, as a result of the attack in Sarajevo, the small countries and the peoples located in the Balkan area were once again blamed as being “the powder keg of Europe”. In the summer of 1914, following a well-orchestrated propaganda, even the public opinion in the countries representing the great powers was in favour of the war, in order to regain the lost “glory”, to get “revenge” for some defeats in the past, to recover “ancient lands”, etc. The Governments, much more realistic than the people, had as purpose nothing else than the interests of each country and each nation. The very notion of “nation” had different meanings in the west (where it was mistaken for the state and had a primary political meaning) as compared to the east (where nations were ethnolinguistic and tended to destroy the multinational empires, in order to form new states, appropriate for these nations). Only the left wing parties were criticising the war, but even some of those (the social-democrat parties in the West) approved, in the end, directly or tacitly, the entry of their countries into the war.

In 1914, Romania was a small European country, with a monarchical form of government (it was a kingdom), having a surface of 137,000 square kilometres, and approximately 7.4 million inhabitants. More than half of all Romanians at that time lived in other states, a small part in the Russian Empire (in the half part of Moldavia located between the Prut and the Dniester rivers, called Bessarabia, occupied by the Russians in 1812), and an even larger part in the Austria-Hungary Empire (in Transylvania, Banat, Crişana, Maramureş, and Bukovina); other Romanians lived in the Balkans, south of the Danube, in Serbia, Greece, Albania, etc. In all these historical provinces mentioned, from the Tsarist and the Austria-Hungary empires, the majority of the population was Romanian. These Romanians from outside the borders of Romania had to take part in the First World War starting from 1914, when their countries joined the war. As such, approximately one million of these Romanians fought, directly or indirectly, in 1914–1916, for causes which were of no concern for them and which even brought them prejudices. In the summer of 1914, Romania, which in 1883 had signed a secret treaty with the Central Powers (Germany and Austria-Hungary), declared its neutrality just like Italy (which had the same relationship with the Central Powers as Romania). It was only two years later, after torments and impetuous and difficult debates, that the country joined the war on the

side of the Entente (France, England, and Russia). Always thinking about their national interest – just like any other country – the Romanians were in a dilemma because they knew that irrespective of their decision, they had something to win and something to lose. As such, if Romania had allied with Germany (and, implicitly, with Austria-Hungary), in case of a victory, it would have lost Transylvania (with the aforementioned neighbouring regions), as well as Bukovina (territories that could not be reclaimed from an ally); if Romania had joined the Entente, in case they won, Romania would have lost Bessarabia (which would remain under Russian occupation). After two years of neutrality, however, it was no longer possible for Romania to remain indecisive without endangering its future and even its existence.

On 14th May 1916, following long and in-depth thoughtfulness, King Ferdinand I (of the German dynasty of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen) called the Crown Council to announce its decision of joining Romania to the Triple Entente and of declaring war against Austria-Hungary. The two groups – unequal, of course – confronted directly, both animated by the desire to defend the country. The great politician Petre Carp – feeling offended and furious with the King when he expressed and motivated his option for the Entente – pronounced hard words and reminded the sovereign he was part of a German dynasty, which had certain interests to defend. Aching, but firm and lucid, the King then uttered memorable words, forgotten by many today:

“Mr. Carp, you were wrong when you spoke of the interests of the dynasty. I am not familiar with these interests, I only know the interests of the country. In my conscience, these two interests intertwine. If I have decided to take this serious step, it’s because, after a thorough analysis, I am deeply and firmly convinced it is in compliance with the true aims of this nation... The dynasty shall follow the fate of this country, winning with it, or losing with it. Since, above all, you should know, Mr. Carp, that my dynasty is Romanian. You made a mistake when you called it foreign, German. No, it is Romanian! Romanians did not bring here my uncle, King Carol, to set up a German dynasty at the mouths of the Danube, but to set up a national dynasty and I claim for My House the honour of having completely fulfilled the mission this people gave to my uncle”.

These were indeed the words (and then the facts) of a great Romanian statesman.

Consequently, in the night of 14–15/27–28 August 1916, Romania declared war against Austria-Hungary, according to the secret agreements signed with the Entente¹, and the Romanian army crossed the Carpathians. It was the moment when the dramas of many Romanian soldiers from Transylvania, Banat, Crişana, Maramureş, etc. started, as they were forced to fight against the Romanians from the Kingdom, dramas literarily enhanced by Liviu Rebreanu in his famous novel “Pădurea spânzuraţilor” (“Forest of the Hanged”), and by others as well, through other means. In 1916–1917, after the occupation of Wallachia and Bucharest, after the

¹ Constantin Kirişescu, *Istoria războiului pentru întregirea României: 1916-1919*, Ediția a III-a, vol. I–II, Bucureşti, 1989.

courageous resistance in Mărăști, Mărășești, and Oituz, we were very close to being completely erased from the world map, being trapped between the threat of the Central Powers and of the eastern one (Bolshevik after some time). The year 1918, with a few shadows and many lights, brought fulfilment to the Romanian national state. Mention should be made that in those years – 1918 and the previous ones – preparations were made to destroy the multinational empires and to emancipate the peoples frustrated after centuries of oppression. As such, from the old Russian, German, and Austria-Hungary empires, were born or reborn under new forms Poland, Czechoslovakia, the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenians (known as Yugoslavia as of 1929), Romania, Austria, Hungary, Germany, the Baltic countries. In Romania's case, the situation is both similar and different from the previously mentioned examples. While the future Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia were multinational states, Austria and Germany – federal states, Hungary, Romania, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, etc. were unitary national states, with absolute majorities formed by the peoples who gave their names.

All these fundamental changes, which had not been seen on the European map for a long time, were made according to precise rules, agreed upon by the international community, and then approved (with certain adjustments, where the winning powers decided) at the Peace Conference in Paris in 1919–1920. The massive territorial and political modifications, which took place during the war years and especially in 1918–1920, have two major components – a national one and an international one. The national component pertains to the wish of the ethnical majorities (previously considered minorities) from certain regions to live in their own states or in states inhabited by the same ethnicities, i.e. to create the necessary conditions so that the majority of the Poles live in Poland, the majority of the Czech live in the Czech Republic, the Slovaks in Slovakia, the Hungarians in Hungary, the Romanians in Romania, etc. Certainly, there were some claiming that all Poles should live in Poland, that all Czechs should live in the Czech Republic, etc. which was impossible, just as there were others who were hoping to preserve, in adjusted forms, the old empires, renamed and revamped, which was again impossible. It is true that this wish for a national unity protected by the national states was the last stage in the evolution of the movements for emancipation, as previously, for approximately two centuries, nationalities only wanted to be equal to the dominating nations, without necessarily asking *expressis verbis* for the breaking of these empires and for the formation of unitary national states. The Romanians living in the Habsburg Empire (and from 1867, in a *sui generis* form of this empire, called Austria-Hungary), as well as those in the Tsarist Empire, together with the Poles, the Czechs, the Slovaks, the Croats, the Serbs, the Baltics, the Ukrainians, etc. were part of that evolution, without big differences or particularities. In 1918, things rushed everywhere in the region, especially after Russia produced the biggest change of political regime in its history, defecting and then concluding a separate peace treaty. Given the new conditions, the Romanians organised themselves, elected their own representative bodies – political and military (of public order) –, and, where possible,

took control over the territory. Certain such representative central bodies, recognised by the international community as legal, decided the fate of Bessarabia, Bukovina, and Transylvania (in its broad meaning, i.e. the old voievodate, including the regions of Banat, Crişana, Sătmăr, Maramureş). Those forums were the “State Council” (gathered in Chişinău, on 27 March/9 April 1918), the “General Congress of Bukovina” (gathered in Cernăuţi, on 15/28 November 1918) and the “Great National Assembly”, through its 1,228 delegates having the right to vote (gathered in Alba Iulia, on 18 November / 1 December 1918).

All those acts of will of the Romanian nation were consequently approved by the world forum authorized to do that, i.e. by the Peace Conference in Paris, in 1919–1920. The other peace conference, which took place after the Second World War, in 1946–1947, reconfirmed the decision taken by the Romanians in 1918 and ratified in 1919–1920, except for the territorial appropriations made by the Stalinist communist regime during and at the end of the war (the north of Bukovina, the land of Herţa, and Bessarabia).

During the period of time ranging from 1848 to 1918, the most legitimate or progressive European movements were those of national emancipation, of obtaining the democratic liberties, of undermining the oppressive empires, of formation of states according to ethnic and national criteria. This is what most nations of that time did, following the example of the Westerners, who had previously done it. That was the most advanced tendency at that time. No one spoke of the European Union, of globalisation, of the territorial autonomy of minorities, or of the elimination of discriminations based on religious criteria.

The great majority of the Romanians were trained then to fight for the formation of their national state, as the Italians, the Germans, the Poles, the Serbs, the Czechs, the Slovaks, the Latvians, the Estonians, the Lithuanians, etc. did too. They did not do it better or worse than others². In this fight of theirs, they were neither more conscious nor more enthusiastic, neither more apathetic nor more reticent than others, than their neighbours. All the data we have show that most of the Romanians wanted the union of Transylvania and of the other provinces with Romania, and that they firmly expressed their wish, at the level of the democratic exigencies of that time. Moreover, the international community appreciated the act of national will of the Romanians, formulated in 1918, and recognized the realities decided by the Romanians. When it was possible, especially in Bukovina, but in Bessarabia and Transylvania as well, the minorities were asked, and some of their members also supported their belonging to Romania. As such, the union, prepared by the most advanced part of the intelligentsia and of the political class of that time, respected the exigencies of the democracy.

² The Romanians – a certain percentage – who did not want the union of their provinces with Romania were mostly working for their adoptive states, being high officials, officers, official councillors, clerks, etc.

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Consequently, modern Romania came to be between 1859 and 1918, simultaneously with Germany and Italy, and remained as such (with some variations, as we have seen) until this day. Since the Second World War, Romania has had the surface of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, but a population three times smaller. Its population of approximately 20 million stable inhabitants is formed of almost 90% ethnic Romanians, 6.4% Hungarians, 2.5% Romani, the rest being formed of small groups of Slavs, Germans, Turkish-Tatars, Armenians, Greeks, Jewish, etc. From the religious and denominational point of view, around 86% of Romania's inhabitants are Orthodox, the others being Roman-Catholic, Greek-Catholic, Protestants, Neo-Protestants, Muslims, Jews, etc. Romania is part of NATO and the EU, even if the stability and future of these groups of states have seriously been challenged during the past years. In today's Europe of 27 member states, in what surface and population are concerned, Romania ranks sixth, after Germany, France, Italy, Spain, and Poland.